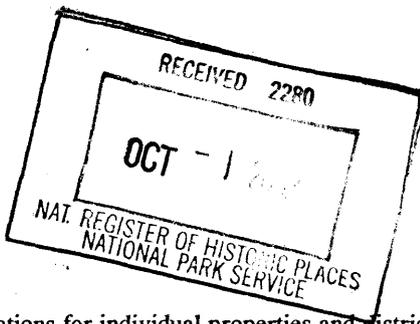


**United States Department of Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**



1342

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Commercial Hotel
other names/site number Fort Crawford Hotel

2. Location

street & number 201 West Blackhawk Avenue N/A not for publication
city or town Prairie du Chien N/A vicinity
state Wisconsin code WI county Crawford code 023 zip code 53821

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Alicia L. Gach
Signature of certifying official/Title

September 27, 2002
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel

Crawford County

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

entered in the National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the

National Register.

See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the

National Register.

See continuation sheet.

removed from the National

Register.

other, (explain:)

Ethan A. Beall

11/15/02

[Signature]

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as
as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- structure
- site
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources
in the count)

contributing	noncontributing
<u>1</u>	buildings
	sites
	structures
	objects
<u>1</u>	0 total

Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property not part of a multiple property
listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources
is previously listed in the National Register**

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
DOMESTIC: HOTEL

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/ NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian: Italianate

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation stone

walls brick

roof synthetics

other wood

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 7 Page 1

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Architectural description: Summary

The Fort Crawford Hotel in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin anchors a corner location in a traditional downtown at the intersection of Prairie and Blackhawk streets in an area that has contiguous structures of the same vintage for several blocks. This building was constructed in the late 1860s with later additions at the back along Prairie Street. Originally built as an office building, it was pressed into service as a hotel almost from the beginning and remained a hotel until it closed. A major remodeling came in 1881 when it was fully converted for hotel use. This is the date that marks the beginning of its period of significance. In 1893, after a fire destroyed the building next door, substantial repairs were made to the third floor and roof. 1875 and 1924 brought additions to the back of the building.

The building rests on a rectangular, stone foundation that supports the three-story structural brick masonry walls with two wood framed floors and a wood framed flat mono-pitched roof, except where the front commercial façade uses columns for strength. While remodeling has occurred to this commercial front level, most of the secondary elevation and the historic second and third floor features are intact. On the exterior, historic period windows are hidden behind wood paneling. The cornice detail, doors, windows and millwork are all fabricated from wood selected from popular styles available at that period in time.

The exterior brick is painted a cream color. There is a large overhanging portion of the roof that forms a decorative cornice, which has a frieze board and soffits, held in place by large double commercial style corbels. The corbels are paired except the last one at the back of the building is single. The upper façade is uniform in height across the front cornice and side parapet elevations. The roof is a mono pitched roof draining to the rear of the building.

Architectural Description: Front Facade

The commercial front is divided into four bays. There is a large masonry column separating the outside entrance to the second level from the other three bays at the west end of the building. Cast iron columns separate the other three bays; currently these columns are boxed out with wood framing and plywood siding. While the bay division of the ground floor has remained constant, the treatment has changed over time. The outside entrance at the far left has double four-panel swinging doors with a four-pane transom above. These details can be seen from the inside, but it is covered on the exterior with plywood type siding. This appears to be the same door that is visible in a historic photograph of the building.

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Section 7 Page 2

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Historically, the central of the three bays had a double two-panel with one pane swinging doors. This was recessed from the street with a tall narrow pane of glass set on a one-panel raised panel wood front. The two side bays had one large pane of glass set on a more decorative wooden front with two beaded ceiling (wainscoting) panels. The base of the panes had a decorative ringed base sill held in place with three decorative wooden brackets. The two cast iron columns with decorative capitals supporting a large cast iron beam supporting the entire front. Historically, various awning or pent roofed extensions covered the walkway in front of the building. The entrance has now been moved to the far right bay. It is now a single aluminum door with full glass. The balance of the front is covered with a T1-11 plywood siding. There is a brick planter where the front meets the sidewalk. This planter is the same vintage as the aluminum door.

Originally the top of the limestone foundation was above the street and sidewalk, with a large single piece of limestone at each entry, one step above this horizontal detail. Today some of the foundation detail is visible, however parts of it have been covered over by subsequent street upgrades.

The second and third floors of the front façade are divided into four regularly spaced window bays. Those on the second floor had four round headed double hung windows. The third floor features segmental arch topped window openings. A historic photograph, pre-1893, shows multipaned double-hung windows on both floors. A second photograph, taken after the 1894 construction of the adjacent city hall, shows that these windows were replaced with one over one, double hung sash.

On both the front and secondary elevation the windows have a raised brick design on the top and sides. At the bottom a large limestone sill is visually held in place with two decorative limestone brackets. In the original portion of the building there is decorative arched interior trim; however, in the addition at the back of the building, the inside has a square upper sash with square trim and arched panes.

Architectural Description: Secondary facade

The original portion of the building consists of the first four bays of the Prairie Street elevation. The same window openings are repeated on the two upper floors. The first floor originally had four windows with segmental arched tops. The two center windows were later converted to door openings. Two of these opening were later bricked shut. Two smaller windows were added on the second floor in 1952. One is located between the first and second window (from the left), the other is to the right of the original right hand window opening. Between the first and second bay of the first floor is an entrance to the basement with a wrought iron rail projecting from the sidewalk. This feature is unchanged from early days.

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Continuation Sheet**

Section 7 Page 3

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prarie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

At the rear of the original structure and at the start of the addition is a hallway running east and west. This east entrance, while boarded up on the exterior, is visible from inside. The secondary entrance is a four-panel raised panel door with a three-pane sidelight on each side set on a solid raised panel. There is a five-pane transom above the door.

The uniform cornice detail did not always exist across the secondary façade (east elevation) like it does today. In 1875 there was a two-story addition. In 1924 there was a third floor added to the addition and the parapet details were made to resemble the detail of the front cornice and east parapet. During the time that the addition was only two stories there was a small wrought iron balcony off of the second floor. Subsequently this was closed in to become a window. The remaining windows follow the same window opening configurations as seen in the main portion of the building.

The rear of the building has only the smaller modified arch windows on all three levels. The raised brick exterior trim is dropped as are the sill brackets. There are four single doors boarded up, only one appears to be original while the others appear to have been cut out of the window openings at the ground level. There is a steel stationary fire escape on the north, coming from a third floor door, running down to a jumping platform at the second level. To the north is a freestanding steel fire escape from second floor to the ground. There is no cornice on the rear.

There were several chimneys on the interior of the building and did not contribute significantly to the overall appearance. They have all been discontinued.

Architectural Description: Interior features

The primary historic use of the commercial level was a restaurant. The former dining room has its original pressed metal ceiling. The border trim still reveals where the original center front entry once existed. Where the new corner aluminum door was added the tin ceiling was not disturbed. The balance of the downstairs was used for food storage or food preparation. There are two sets of stairs leading from the ground floor. One is accessible from the exterior only and leads to the second floor. There is an interior staircase off of the dining room that also leads to second floor. There is a simple narrow set of stairs leading to the third floor. The front third of the first floor was a dining and reception area, the middle area was also dining area, and the last third was for food storage and food preparation. The cellar appears to have had little use over the years. The heater is located there; there is one small room that looks like a site built cooler. There is another room about 12' x 16' at the point where the exterior basement stairs penetrate the foundation wall. This room has a framed floor and wood flooring, while the balance of the basement has just a dirt floor. Perhaps this was rented as office space during times of prosperity.

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Section 7 Page 4

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

The hotel configuration has an entry along the interior wall. On the second floor there are large front rooms and the hall is to the side for two-thirds of the way down the hall. The last third of the way the hall turns to the inside and becomes a center hall with smaller rooms on each side. There are eleven rooms on this floor. These rooms were created in the mid-1950s when the hotel was remodeled; large rooms were divided to create additional rooms. On the third floor, as soon as the stairs reached this floor on the inside wall, the hall turns right to the outside and this floor has a center hall throughout. The third floor has seventeen rooms now; these were created from earlier rooms in the 1950s as well. One feature of this 1950s remodeling was that it was done before the widespread use of paneling and narrow trim; every effort was made to make it look like the original. This includes the four-panel doors, transoms, transom hardware, tall baseboards, and look alike trim on the doors. One disadvantage of this remodeling was that smaller square windows were cut into the brick to get windows in the now smaller sized rooms. The original windows retain their arched interior trim.

At one point the City of Prairie du Chien condemned the building and sought to have it razed to clean up the downtown. The City later purchased the building, put on a new roof and covered the window opening with plywood to prevent vandalism. The roof has been in good condition until recently. Deterioration from leaking is limited to one area in the addition on the lowest part of the roof.

While many of the features of the exterior have been covered with plywood, the building retains a high level of architectural integrity. Beneath the plywood, historic windows are intact, as are historic doors. The original cornice is also extant. The majority of alterations are in the historic storefront where changing commercial fashions resulted in remodeling. Many of the interior features are also intact, including original wood trim, window surrounds and doors. The major change was the alteration in the hotel room configurations in the 1950s. However, the original hall plan and staircases remain.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Period of Significance

1881-1952

Significant Dates

1881
1893
1924

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 1

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Statement of Significance: Summary

The Commercial Hotel/ Fort Crawford Hotel is nominated under Criterion A in the area of commerce. It is locally significant as one of the major hotels in the city of Prairie du Chien during its period of prosperity in the late nineteenth century. In its early days, the hotel was noted for its "elegant rooms." While the community declined in prosperity, the hotel remained in business under a succession of owners. During the Depression, when many hotels faltered, the hotel attracted traveling businessmen and parents visiting the local boarding school. The changes to the building have been the result of adapting to the needs of travelers and the waxing and waning fortunes of the hotel itself. The period of significance is 1881-1952. The period begins with the full conversion of the former commercial block into a hotel in 1881 and ends with the 50-year period. The building remained a hotel until 1969.

Historic Context

The United States Army withdrew its troops from Fort Crawford in 1856 ending an economic influence that began in 1816; by then Prairie du Chien was almost two centuries old. Modern Prairie du Chien began to emerge with the coming of the railroad in 1857; the area's economy was no longer dependent on the influx of money from the fur trade or the military at Fort Crawford.

In the late 1850's a group of immigrants, many of them German, settled and built the small business economy that characterized modern Prairie du Chien; one of the most active for more than a quarter century was John George Schweizer, known as George or J. George. He emigrated to the U.S in 1852 when he was twenty-five; three years later, he arrived in Prairie du Chien. His obituary summed up his influence.

He has been engaged in the hotel business here for 26 years and was the proprietor of the Commercial House at the time of his death. J. G. Schweizer was always an earnest, energetic, industrious and estimable citizen. He worked unceasingly for years to establish himself and earned a reputation for enterprise. He earned money but never to hoard it. Every dollar he earned was put in to some substantial improvement and in his steady way, he added to the building of the city. He was man of sound judgement and a patron of education. He was one of the first directors of the German School, a city council and board of education member. He was a careful man in every position of

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

public trust. Those who knew him long and well were all his firm friends. [*Courier*, 16 May 1882]

Schweizer's first commercial risk was running the Wisconsin House, a small tavern and inn that featured a sample room on Main Street. In October 1857 he married Johanna Wachter. Her brother, George, was also trying to establish a successful business. When Schweizer leased the Kane Hotel in 1861, he signaled his intent to become a major player in the business life of Prairie du Chien. His brother-in-law joined him in his first big venture until 1864 when Schweizer bought the hotel. He paid \$15,000 in June 1864.

The Kane was an old establishment built in 1839 as the Phoenix Hotel—a three story, rambling wood structure with 60 rooms and a large stable in back. George and Alonzo Kane ran it successfully for a time before leasing it to Schweizer. Centrally located on Main Street, the hotel had long been an anchor; other businesses grew up near it and located themselves in relationship to it. Today its location would be the intersection of Wisconsin and Main Street—the west approach to the Highway 18 Bridge

In the 1856, the Union Block, a three-story business building, was erected directly across Main Street from the Kane. Together they became the center of Uppertown, the part north of Fort Crawford; Lowertown was south of the fort. By the late 1860's The Union Block had fallen into disrepair and was largely vacant. A group of influential businessmen including John Lawler, H.L. Dousman and J.G. Schweizer collected money to attract a new business. James Traner had a small carriage factory in Bloomington, Wisconsin and was induced to come to Prairie du Chien. McGregor, Iowa also courted him. Traner had a short, brilliant run making a good quality carriage until he lost everything in the 1873 fire. For seventeen years until the promising Traner Carriage Factory and the old Kane Hotel perished in a devastating fire in November 1873, the two buildings were at the heart of the community's life.

The Schweizer Property 1864- 1893

In 1864 the railroad decided to relocate its depot from the Lowertown site west of the fort to the St. Feriote Island site directly in front of the river. This was the same year Schweizer bought the Kane Hotel. That same year, on March 31, 1864, J. George Schweizer paid Hercules Dousman \$1,000 for the land presently occupied by the city hall and the former hotel. The legal description in 1864 when Schweizer brought the property was “**The whole front of Lot one and 27½ feet of the front of Lot 2 so as to form 77½ front on the N side of Bluff Street and 150 feet on the west side of Prairie Street.**”¹ Important early settlers—Pierre Lessard, Pierre Pacquette, Jean Brunet, in addition to

¹ Several street names in the business district have been changed since the Schweizer property took its place on the

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Hercules Dousman—had previously owned it. The property remained in the Schweizer family until a fire in February 1893 burned the opera house building next door and damaged the hotel. In April 1893 D.F. Horsfall, C.A. Patzlaff and William Leefeldt purchased the property from the Schweizer estate for \$1,500. Leefeldt was a builder and Horsfall and Patzlaff had a lumber company. Their intent was to rebuild the Commercial Hotel quickly and sell or lease it; the hotel had suffered damage as result of the fire. In February 1894 the group sold the west part of the property to the city for \$300 with the understanding the city would construct a municipal building within a year. Although the current city hall and the hotel share a common wall, their history and ownership diverged after that 1894 sale until 1981 when the city purchased the former Fort Crawford Hotel building.

Sometime in the late 1860's Schweizer built a three-story business block known as the Schweizer Block on the corner and a two-story building to the west; the two shared a common wall suggesting they may have been constructed at different times. The two-story building housed the Opera House (also known as Germania Hall) on the second floor. Large gatherings, concerts and entertainment were featured in the spacious area. The first floor was leased to businesses. The larger three story Schweizer Block was also similarly used. The History of Crawford County (1884) recounts: "The upper floors of this block were used for public halls, and offices, while the first floor was used for business purposes." By early 1870 both buildings were in use. They may have been in use a year or two previous to that.

Unfortunately, the local newspapers from 1867- to 1870 are not available, and the city was not organized until 1872; therefore, details of the period when it was constructed are sketchy. The *Weekly North Iowa Times* reported that a fire broke out and entirely consumed the buildings on the north side of the Bluff Street block between Main and Prairie streets. The date was April 6, 1867. The story lists eight affected businesses and the landowners. Hercules Dousman owned five parcels; Schweizer owned one. George Wachter had a saloon and billard's room on the Schweizer property and saved the contents in a damaged condition. No mention was made of a large block.[10 April 1867]

Other brief references to fires on that block in those years do exist. Dates are variously listed as 1866, 1868 and 1870. "A reference from the 1938 Courier story states that Henry C. Poehler opened a grocery on that block in 1868. *The Sausage Row Fire* destroyed five businesses including Poehler's one winter night in 1868 or 1870." The article gives both dates adding to the confusion. "Marcus Friedrich's harness shop was the westerly most building left standing, and Schweizer's Hotel, now the Fort Crawford Hotel, was the one building standing to the east." [*Courier* 8 & 15 March 1938]

landscape. In this document the street names which existed at the time were used. Changes affecting this account are Bluff Street to Blackhawk Avenue in the 1920's; Church Street to Beaumont Road in the early 1930's and Minnesota Street to Wacouta Avenue in the late 1970's.

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Section 8 Page 4

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

A *Union* article, December 1881, had a passing reference: "A row of wooden buildings between Main and Prairie burned 15 years ago but were all replaced before 1871." That would make the fire 1866, if the fifteen years were an exact number. Marcus Friedrich built his shop on the Bluff Street site in 1868 expressly for his own use; he was still on that site at the turn of the century. The fire involving Friedrich's property had to have occurred after 1868. Further, because the names of those who lost businesses in the fires are entirely different according to the two articles, there may have been two fires that devastated the block in a few short years.

Henry C. Poehler's biography offers the best clue to the earliest use of the buildings. Later references indicate that he lost his grocery business to fire twice before he built his own block. On April 1, 1867 Poehler and Kiefer were in business together in the Schweizer Block. No mention is made of any harm done to his business in the April 6, 1867 fire. In 1868 Poehler and Keifer opened up a store in the area where the west section of city hall is today. They lost their business in the Sausage Row Fire sometime in 1868 or 1869. In 1869 the two dissolved their partnership and Poehler built a small frame structure two blocks east on Bluff Street. He lost that business to fire November 25, 1870 and in December 1870, he was preparing to open a store in Schweizer's Block. [*Union* 5 January 1871] He stayed there until 1872 when he built his first brick block on the site of his 1870 fire. In 1875 he put another brick block next to the first.

While the date of construction for Schweizer's buildings is not certain, one later reference indicates the Schweizer Block was in operation early in 1867. Clearly both buildings were in use by early 1870 and are shown on the 1870 Birdseye Map of Prairie du Chien. These references indicate that sometime between 1864 and 1870 Schweizer built a fine three-story brick block—the current hotel building.

Ads in the *Crawford County Press* January and February 1870 issues indicate that Ewen Morrison's Hardware Store and Philip Weisenberger's Tailor Shop were both located in the Schweizer Block. In December 1870 Henry C. Poehler occupied space for his grocery store there after having been burned out on another site November 1870.

Important long time merchant, Herman Weidenfeld, who arrived about the same time as Schweizer in the 1850s, had moved into the new brick block in 1870. [*Courier* 25 February 1870] In 1872 Weidenfeld advertisements located his business one door east of Germania Hall in Schweizer's Block. Erdenberger and Nisson had opened a new meat market there as well. In 1874 Lippert and Kosa opened a meat market in Schweizer's Block.

Early in 1870s the *Courier* projected the direction of business growth:

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Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 5

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

From present indications business seems to be tending up-town toward the Mondell House and Church Street. We, however, believe the Bluff Street Bridge and area around it to be the business center of Prairie du Chien for years to come. [22 February 1870]

After the Kane Hotel and Traner Carriage Factory Fire of 1873, Main Street lost its place as the center of Prairie du Chien to Bluff Street. Before the fire, Schweizer had important business interests at the center of activity on both streets. After the fire, he shifted his business interest to Bluff Street. Other businesses also relocated to the new commercial center. During the first half of the 1870s, eleven business blocks were built on Bluff Street in the three blocks between Main and Minnesota Streets. Schweizer's Block on the corner of Main and Prairie was occupied when the building boom began. Possibly because of the expanding business in the vicinity in 1875 Schweizer put an addition on the north end of his block. The former Schweizer Block is now the oldest of the existing blocks built during the burst of economic activity that has shaped the face of modern Prairie du Chien for 130 years.²

The Commercial Hotel Building 1881- 2001

When the Commercial Hotel was damaged in the 1893 fire, it had been a hotel since 1881, at first operated by C.F. Petrie, but then by Schweizer until his death May 1882. *The History of Crawford and Richland County* published in 1884 stated that as soon after the Kane Fire as Schweizer could get his block free of business tenants, he would start a hotel. Contemporary reports do not indicate that he started a hotel until 1881. The complete destruction of the Mondell House in December 1880 may have offered an opportunity for a successful hotel without competition from the always-popular Mondell. *The History of Crawford and Richland County* further reported on the Commercial Hotel in 1884: "It

² Other new buildings included the 1870 Jacob Rafauff built brick block. In 1871 Seibert built a fine double brick block costing \$10,000 across Bluff Street from the Schweizer Block which stands today at the SW corner of Prairie and Blackhawk Avenue. John Grace and William Zieprecht also built new brick blocks in 1871. The Grace block still stands on the SW corner of Blackhawk and Wacouta. In 1872 Wetzel built on the choice SW corner of Bluff and Church Street; the building stands today, and Poehler built his first brick block. In 1873 the Garvey Block and the Masonic Building went up. The Masonic building survived the Big Fire of 1899 and is occupied today on the north side of Blackhawk Avenue near Beaumont Road. In 1874 Thomas Looby and Joseph Wachute built brick buildings. The Wachute building stands to the west of Grace's Block. In 1875 Henry C. Poehler put up another block alongside the one he built in 1872. Considering that the Panic of 1873 caused a real economic down turn, this building spurt is the more remarkable. Poehler lost both of his blocks during the Big Fire that took the north side of the block between Church and Minnesota Streets February 8, 1899. Totally, Henry C. Poehler lost four businesses to fire in a thirty-year period. Zieprecht lost his and replaced it in 1899.

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

contains many elegant rooms on the first, second and third floors; also a fine billiard hall and bar are run in connection with the house....The Commercial has telephone connection with all parts of the city, as well as with the city of McGregor." Early references to the new hotel indicate that the name had not been finalized. It was Schweizer's House, the Commodore House, the Commercial House, and finally the Commercial Hotel. [*Union* 13 May 1881] An historic edition of the *Union* published June 3, 1898 stated: "The Commercial Hotel started in 1881, and today is the finest in the city."

Clearly Schweizer was beginning another major business transition when he died suddenly May 11, 1882. He was just 55—young enough to launch a new venture. A contemporary railroad business directory listed Mrs. George Schweizer as the owner of both the Germania (located next door) and the Commercial Hotel from 1882 through 1888. For a while her son Charles helped with the hotel, but he became the district attorney in La Crosse and had less and less time to spend on the family business. Her oldest son, J. George Jr., took an active part in the business; he seems to have learned well from his father. The newspaper reported:

Among the requirements of a first class hotel is a large souled, courteous landlord, one who is quick to anticipate the wants of his patrons and prompt to execute their wishes. No hotel has a landlord who possesses this fine combination of qualities more than the Commercial House. George is a thorough gentleman, and his house a popular resort.
[*Union* 3 January 1889]

In 1891, two years after Mrs. Schweizer's death, her son, J. George, was listed as the manager of the Opera House, and Thomas Stackland, proprietor of the Commercial Hotel.

When the Commercial Hotel was damaged in the 1893 fire that destroyed the Opera House, it had been a hotel for at least twelve years. The third floor and the roof were destroyed and the hotel had water damage throughout, but it was clear that the hotel could be put back in operating order quickly. William Leefeldt, a builder and D.F. Horsfall and C.A.Patzlaff, lumber dealers bought the property and by mid 1893 were offering it for sale or lease.

Messrs. Horsfall, Patzlaff and Wm. Leefeldt have jointly purchased the remains of the Opera House Block and will proceed to put the hotel building in good repair. A few weeks at farthest will see the hotel thoroughly rebuilt, and no doubt occupied. While it is presumed that it is the intention of the new proprietors to rebuild the Opera House also, they say that no steps will be taken in that direction for the present. [*Union* 30 March 1893]

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Section 8 Page 7

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

By late April the *Union* said that Leefeldt had the repairs on the Commercial House completed. In June it reported that a new plate glass window, an expensive and elegant improvement, was placed in the Commercial Hotel. Through June, July and August, it was advertised for sale or rent.

For the next decade it had a succession of landlords some of whom were also owners, John Maher, Paul Cherrier, A.C. Rice, F. E. Garrow, and Carl Morris. B.C. Rosencranz long experienced at the sanitarium on Michigan and Bluff Street took over the operation in 1917 and paid \$9,000 for the property in January 1919. In September 1920, his son Howard acquired part interest for \$2,000; he ran it for five years and sold his interest. In October 1924 the Dunne sisters from Minneapolis took over and did major alterations taking out a \$2,000 mortgage to complete them. Most probably these alterations included the changing of the 1875 addition from two to three stories. [*Courier* 4 November 1924]

From 1925 until January 1934, it was suffering a long vacancy; the hotel ended up in a foreclosure action in 1927.

In 1933 John Daly acquired the property and gave the old building new life and a new name, the Fort Crawford Hotel. John Daly grew up in Wisconsin Rapids and had sporadically worked as teamster for the circus in his early years. A friend asked him to join in a hotel business in Boscobel. After a year, they mutually agreed that the business could support only one family. John married Mabel in 1933. They acquired the Commercial Hotel property, completely renovated it and opened it January 1, 1934 as the Fort Crawford Hotel. The new Highway 18 suspension toll bridge going to Marquette, Iowa had opened in 1932 putting the Fort Crawford Hotel on a busy interstate route. The newspaper reported on their project:

Taking over the former Commercial Hotel property under the Thomas Price mortgage October 1933, John V. Daly invested \$6,000 in alterations, plumbing, painting and complete refurbishing. Running water was piped into all the rooms, inner box springs and new mattresses were placed on all the beds. Every guestroom was completely renovated and repainted or repapered. Mr. Daly contends that a guest securing a good night's sleep at popular low price sends a half dozen others guests besides returning himself. The old run down hotel was an eyesore before Mr. Daly took charge. The weather-beaten red brick front was greatly improved by several coats of cream paint and rich green trim. The city would greatly improve its buildings by the same treatment. Mr.

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Daly is a hometown booster and buys all supplies and printing locally. [*Courier* 27 March 1934]

Mabel Daly remembers starting up in the heart of the Depression "was a tough go for a long while and lots and lots of hard work." Once during the 1935 or 1936 she said such a sandstorm came up that when they went to make the beds the next morning, she could see the outline where the customers had slept. It was a busy time like Easter or Mother's Day, they had to get in an extra crew and clean the place from top to bottom.

Interviewed on a July day when the heat index was 100, Mabel recalled the air conditioning. If it got really hot, John got extra blocks of ice from the iceman, probably Art Zabel, put the ice in a galvanized wash tub in the middle of the lounge and set fans around it. She said it actually cooled the place pretty well. In their time at the Fort Crawford, John always seemed to be working on the plumbing, but there never was a bath in every room, probably two rooms to a bath. The hotel had 30-35 rooms on the two upper floors. The first floor had a lobby, lounge, bar, restaurant, and kitchen. It was heated with coal fed from a hopper.

Mabel did much of the cooking, and long time Crawford County Board Chairman, Bob Dillman, who grew up across the street from the Fort Crawford Hotel, said her regular Sunday baked chicken and mashed potatoes were the best he has ever eaten. A *Courier* article of 1938 praised the catfish there. Mabel remembered when they first started, they sold a T-bone steak dinner complete with salad, soup, dessert and coffee for 75 cents. The restaurant soon became a favorite dining spot with the local residents, as well as with the guests.

John never lost his love of the circus, put up lots of posters, and named his hotel bar, the Circus Room. He went off to see the Cole Circus if it was anywhere near; traveling circuses always found him and stayed at the Fort Crawford Hotel.

Mabel recalls that John was a sociable Irishman who would remember people and call them by name after meeting them just once. Dillman, who lost his mother before he was year old, spent lots of time with his grandfather, Herman Craig and Craig's good friend, John Daly. Every Sunday, John saved the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Chicago Tribune* for Bob; he would read well into the night until he had finished them. Daly also had the Western Union Office in the hotel lobby and would pay the young "Bobbie" Dillman 5 cents to deliver a telegram and \$1.00 for a singing telegram. He would don his Western Union cap, get on his bicycle and deliver the messages. Most of the singing

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telegrams were for the girls at St. Mary's Academy. The nuns insisted one of them be present when he sang the birthday greetings from their parents.

The hotel succeeded because it attracted many traveling businessmen during the week; on the weekend, parents of boys who boarded at Campion Jesuit High School came for visits and stayed at the Fort Crawford Hotel. For years John had tried to solve the problem of noise coming from the Opera House annoying his second and third floor guests. No solution was found until the Opera House itself went silent from disuse.

By 1953, both Mabel and John were weary of the endless hours and sold the business to Bob and Evelyn Sebastian who had worked for them as clerk and waitress. Bob was 27 and just back from the service when they took over in July 1953. At that time people credited John Daly with good business sense during his almost twenty years at the Fort Crawford Hotel.

When Daly became owner in 1934, many hotels were going broke. Now the Fort Crawford is one of the best small hotels in the area. The hotel was redecorated from top to bottom when Daly took over and was redecorated just last year. An air conditioning system was installed this summer, which keeps the dining room, lobby and bar at cool temperatures. Bob and Ethel Sebastian have purchased the equipment and furniture from Daly and will run the business under the same name. [*Courier* 29 July 1953]

The Dalys kept the building until October 1969 when the Sebastians were ready to leave the long hours and endless hard work; they sold it for \$20,000. After 1969 the hotel entered another period of dormancy. Finally the city of Prairie du Chien bought the building in 1981 for \$25,000 and added a new roof for \$10,000. In those two decades since the purchase, the city council has alternately discussed renovating the two buildings into a new city hall or tearing down the hotel for a parking lot. A score of hot summers and cold winters have gone by at the Fort Crawford without occupants except for the friendly ghosts that some city workers claim they have encountered.

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Conclusion

The Commercial House / Fort Crawford Hotel is locally significant in the area of commerce. By providing lodging, the hotel played an important role in the commercial life of the city. Examples of this resource type can be found even in the smallest cities in the state and reflect various periods of commercial growth of a community. Some sort of lodging was often the first commercial use of a building in a new locality. Over time, the rough early hotels were replaced by more substantial facilities as the growth of the community increased demand for accommodations. The growth of motels on the fringes of cities and villages ultimately led to the decline of most hotels outside of major metropolitan areas.

From 1881 through 1969 the Commercial House, later the Fort Crawford Hotel, provided lodging in the city of Prairie du Chien. During its early years it was one of the premier hotels in the city. As noted in contemporary accounts, the hotel had "elegant rooms," a billiard hall, a bar, and telephone service. These would have been features that appealed to business travelers and other visitors to the city. Prairie du Chien's location on the railroad line and on the Mississippi River, as well as a city serving the surrounding agricultural community, would have necessitated a major hotel for the traveling public. In an era before large-scale retailing and easy transportation, business representatives would bring their wares and products to the towns they visited, often with the hotel serving as their sales headquarters.

The Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel adapted with changing needs and tastes of travelers through the decades. While it had earlier served the train, boat and horse traffic, the hotel later accommodated automobile travelers as the newly opened suspension bridge to Iowa brought interstate traffic to the hotel. Business travelers continued to stay at the hotel, as did the parents of the boys and the nearby boarding school. The ground floor has housed a billiard room, a bar, a restaurant, and a Western Union office. In addition to serving the hotel's guests the first floor restaurant was popular with the local populace. Over the years, additional plumbing and bathrooms were added, air conditioning was installed in the public rooms, and the large rooms were subdivided to create more rooms. All of the alterations responded to the changing needs of travelers and to the changing fortunes of the hotel. Unlike most examples of its type, this example was able to stay in operation through 1969. This largely intact building is significant for the role it has played in the commercial history of Prairie du Chien.

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
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Wisconsin Word Processing Format (Approved 1/92)

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Section 10 Page 1

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, Wisconsin

Verbal Boundary Description:

City of Prairie du Chien Legal Description:

“All that part of Lot 1 and the East 27 feet of Lot 2 and the east 77 ½ feet of Lot 13, all in Block number 2, Union Plat of the City of Prairie du Chien lying north of the following described line:

Commencing at the Southeast corner of said Block number 2, thence northerly along the East line of said Block 2 114.00 feet to the point of beginning, thence westerly parallel with the north line of said Lot 1 a distance of 32.00 feet, thence southerly parallel to the east line of said Lot 1 a distance of 12.00 feet, thence westerly parallel to the north line of said Lot 1 a distance of 45.50 feet, thence southerly parallel to the east line of said Lot 1 a distance of 20.00 feet, thence easterly parallel with the south line of Lot 1 a distance of 22.00 feet thence southerly parallel with the east line of Lot 1 a distance of 24.00 feet, thence easterly parallel with the south line of said Lot 1 distance of 22.00 feet, thence southerly parallel with the east line of said Lot 1 a distance of 65.00 feet, thence easterly along the south line of said lot 1 to the point of beginning.”

Boundary Justification:

This is a portion of the parcel purchased in 1864 by George Schweizer that has been historically associated with the building. The boundary conforms to the legal description of the property.

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Name of Property

Crawford County
County and State

Wisconsin

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional Items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title					
organization	City of Prairie du Chien		date	10/01	
street&number	207 West Blackhawk Avenue		telephone	608-326-6406	
city or town	Prairie du Chien	state	WI	zip code	53821

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, WI

The following information is the same for all photos:

Commercial Hotel / Fort Crawford Hotel
Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, WI
Photograph by Mark Ihm
May 2001
Negatives at the Wisconsin Historical Society

Photo 1 of 7
View of front and side elevations, looking northwest

Photo 2 of 7
View of side and rear elevations, looking southwest

Photo 3 of 7
View of rear elevation (left), looking south

Photo 4 of 7
View of former dining room with pressed metal ceiling

Photo 5 of 7
Interior - view of main interior staircase

Photo 6 of 7
Interior - door with transom, third floor

Photo 7 of 7
Interior - typical second floor window